

MARITIME RESCUE INSTITUTE

COASTAL NOTES – 27 NOVEMBER 2007

Browse a menu in an ordinary Portuguese restaurant and you'll see a range and variety of fish on offer that far exceeds most high class eateries in this country. Alongside cod, sea bass, tuna and prawns will be grey bream, golden bream, gurnard, conger, octopus, squid, sardines, salt cod, hake, swordfish and scabbard. Nearly all this fish will have been caught locally and bought fresh on the market that morning.

This market is likely to be right on their doorstep; most of the small ports still have a fish market, where the day's catch is on sale to local buyers. Some markets are not much bigger than a good sized living room, yet are packed with tables and trays of sparkling fresh fish, being haggled over by knowledgeable housewives. The market is the place to buy the fish for your tea, not fish shops. Most housewives are clearly happy to deal with their fish as it left the sea, bones, fins, skin and all, although stall holders will scale and de-fin if asked.

More surprising are the open air markets, where small catches of all kinds of sea food are on offer. Bin liners or cardboard boxes split open and laid out on the ground make up most of the 'stalls'; planks of wood across a couple of stones account for the rest, sitting in a corner of the harbour, with not a piece of ice or refrigeration in sight. Yet, they were popular; the fish seemed perfectly fresh; the well informed Portuguese would no doubt soon send 'off' fish to its proper resting place - down a seagull's neck!

Unlike here, the harbours are jam packed with fishing boats. Most are small with no more than two crew members. They mostly work baited lines, tangle nets or set traps for octopus and squid. Octopus traps are clever, relying more on psychology than imprisonment. Octopuses have no skeleton so can squeeze out of tiny spaces, but they do like to shelter in holes in the rocks: so, an octopus trap resembles an elongated flower pot, weighted on one side to make it lie flat on the ground. The octopus thinks this is a good place to hide and crawls inside; even when the trap is hauled, the octopus feels safe so stays put until it's too late to escape.

The striking difference between the fishing industry in Portugal and here is the sheer number of fishermen still making a good living. Harbours supporting well in excess of 100 boats are common; views are reminiscent of pictures of Stonehaven or Wick at the height of the herring boom, when the water almost disappears under the volume of boats. Yet, these large numbers of boats are fishing lines, tangle nets or traps so the catch is much more selective; the sea bed is unharmed and clearly there are still plenty of fish in the sea.

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